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ABSTRACT

A successful peer support program features senior-level students who have completed their student teaching as support persons and peer teachers for beginning student teachers. Following their student teaching, these peer teachers participate in a seminar to evaluate and synthesize their undergraduate program, including their recent student teaching experience. They are then paired with beginning student teachers to act as their supporters, advisors, and sympathetic confidants. Interns, following their field experience, tend to be slightly out-of-touch with the university setting and anxious to obtain a position. The opportunity to be a peer support person seems to minimize these reactions in their final semester. As peer supporters, they are again involved directly in the classroom and with students, though in a different role. Someone depending upon them for assistance increases their confidence in their own skills. It is encouraging to the beginning student teachers to have "recent survivors" with whom they can feel a rapport. This relationship becomes closer, and in some ways, more helpful, than that with the cooperating teacher and the supervisor. Cooperating teachers welcome the peer supporters and view them as another resource. Supervisors develop a closer professional relationship with the peer supporters. (JD)

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PEER SUPPORT DURING STUDENT TEACHING:

A SHARED RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

Typically peer teaching has been employed because it would be likely to motivate students, maintain student interest, improve skills, and enhance interaction. In the literature, the idea of peer teaching has been discussed widely primarily at the elementary and secondary school levels. Since the advent of mainstreaming, peer-assisted learning has received increasing attention. Chiefly, students have been asked to act as academic or emotional support, in teaching or counseling roles, for other students. Little has been written on peer teaching at the college level.

However, available articles in recent years showed peer teaching at the college level was present in a variety of situations including courses in algebra, anatomy, biology, psychology, sociology, and in pre-student teaching and micro-teaching. One program in Illinois used

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upper-level undergraduate students to aid faculty teaching freshman and sophomore classes (Jabker and Rives, 1978). A few articles also discussed students as peer advisors helping in orientation of new students or aiding in the adjustment of returning evening students (Henrichson and Zwibelman, 1979).

The effectiveness of peer-assisted learning situations was evaluated by several writers. In a required anatomy course, student tutors and tutees scored higher than students experiencing lecture/discussion sessions (Dunkin and Hook, 1978). Students in a team learning approach completed two semester's work in one semester with high mastery of the algebra material (Norton, 1978). Gains for students were reported in sociology also (McNall, 1975). Peer teaching as a strategy has enhanced student attitudes toward a class as well (Clifford, 1977; Norton, 1978; McNall, 1975). These positive attitudes were reflected in increased self concepts, willingness to ask questions, and a higher level of interaction.

Peer teaching appeared to have two main effects: higher achievement and an increase in the confidence of the peer teaching and learner. Primarily because of the second effect, the peer support team program was initiated at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Senior-level students participated in a seminar following their student teaching where the purpose was to evaluate and synthesize their undergraduate professional program, including their recent student teaching experience. This seminar offered an opportunity for working as peer support persons with students just entering student teaching. It was anticipated that service as a peer support person

would provide an opportunity for the post-intern students to reexamine their own experience from a new perspective, use their experience by offering some practical help for a less experienced student, and see themselves as sources of valuable information.

The peer support teams were to provide a different kind of aid for the inexperienced student intern also. Immediacy and recency of experience were viewed as valuable factors in genuinely relating to responses of those students new to a situation. Beyond the immediate understanding that peer support people could offer, it was suspected that the quality of relationship between a neutral sharer of ideas might be different from that of supervisor or cooperating teacher with grading responsibilities. Students might be more likely to share concerns, mistakes, initial angers, anxieties and conflicts with someone whom they could regard as a peer than one who was seen as an evaluator. The additional person also expanded the human sources available for the student.

Organization of the Peer Support Teams

In an initial meeting, the experienced participants listed concerns and problems they had in the beginning of their own student teaching internships and possibilities they saw in a peer support relationship. The list of concerns included such items as learning students' names, feeling confident, adjusting to cooperating teacher expectations, emotional fatigue, dealing with the desire to be liked, preparation and classroom management. Students discussed alternatives in dealing with these concerns. In reviewing their past experiences these students could adjust their expectations and assume a supportive

role for the beginning student teachers. Peer support members recognized their role as one of providing support for the less experienced student, rather than one of evaluation or supervision. They also were not expected to inform the university supervisor or cooperating teacher about the student intern's performance. Rather, they were to share insights, experiences and suggest possible solutions to problems.

The specific responsibilities of the peer support person included observing the student teacher six times during the semester and reading about supervision and other areas in education to better help their student. Additionally, they were to keep a journal documenting their experience and attend regular seminars with the university instructor to discuss observations, consulting skills and other relevant information.

With their position clearly defined, the peer support members met with their designated student teacher interns to get to know them, and to talk about the purposes of peer support, and the role of each member in relation to other, and to arrange future meeting times. Factors in matching students were interests, abilities, subject area or grade level. Principals and cooperating teacher of involved elementary and secondary schools were contacted and their approval was obtained to initate the program.

Peer Support Team Discussions

During the semester, the peer support paired teams discussed a wide variety of topics. Initially, the student interns expressed concerns and fears to the peer support person about matters such as appropriate first day activities, classroom management and discipline. During the early weeks, differences in teaching styles and methods between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher and the resolution or integration of the differences became a deep concern for some. As the semester progressed, an array of ideas pertaining to curriculum, methods and theory were exchanged by the team members. Alternative solutions to a variety of situations were considered. Behavior management remained a topic of high priority. Also debated were the advantages and problems involved in grading and in giving report cards. Personal relationships between the student interns and other adults in the internship setting were frequently discussed. Conflicts between the student intern and the classroom teacher or aide concerning classroom procedures and structure were analyzed and possible solutions were sought. Even the frustration and disappointment which was felt by the student intern toward the university supervisor because of breakdown in communication was shared by the paired teams.

The peer support people also brought news from the campus to the interns. Once removed from campus life, intern students found it difficult to keep up with campus routines. Keeping the intern informed about deadlines for certification requirements, National

Teacher Examinations and graduation forms as well as providing information about campus workshops and conferences of interest became an additional part of the peer supporter's job.

Advantages of Peer Support

The essential question to be answered when any new program is initiated is the value of that program to its participants. What does peer support provide for student interns and for post-interns that typical supervisory programs do not?

In order to determine the impact of the peer support experience, interviews of peer supporters were conducted on several occasions during the semester. The questions included:

How have you used your own student teaching experience to help the new intern?

How has the Peer Support Program aided you in synthesizing and/or evaluating your previous school-related experiences?

In what ways has this experience been beneficial to you?

What parts of the experience were difficult for you?

Would you recommend this program be continued? Discuss.

Student interns were asked similar questions:

How has the Peer Support Program been of help to you?

What parts of the peer support experience were difficult for you?

What suggestions do you have to improve the program?

Would you recommend this program be continued? Discuss.

Results of the interviews from the two groups of students indicate that the peer support experience was seen as valuable by both groups.

Viewpoint of Student Teachers

The student interns reported feeling that they had "a shoulder to cry on" and "an ear to listen" in the peer support person. They believed that the peer support person would "not take things personally" and would be able to keep information they were receiving in perspective. Knowing that the peer support person had recently been in a similar situation was also helpful, as was the realization that, as interns, they were not the only ones who had had problems. As expected, some interns mentioned that they felt more comfortable discussing certain situations with the peer support person than with the university supervisor.

Most interns mentioned getting questions answered by peer supporters, ranging from campus news, National Teacher Examinations deadlines, to more personal matters. Peer support also provided a structure wherein both students could look at alternative ways of viewing a situation. Self-confidence of interns was strengthened as peer supporters listened to approaches to problems generated by the less experienced students. The experienced students gave positive, constructive feedback which resulted in the interns feeling reassured and believing that their ideas had a value. The interns also appreciated the peer person's ability to note and talk about their progress. Close friendships resulted for some participants because of the shared experience.

Peer Supporter Perspective

The post-interns who served as peer-supporters were also enthusiastic in their evaluation of the program. These students reported that they "gained a different perspective on which to base decisions and

outlook." No longer casual observers, they found their observation skills were sharpened through visiting the student interns at the placement sites. The experienced students believed they became more aware of alternatives, could more quickly recognized critical factors involved and were able more objectively to evaluate potential solutions when they were personally involved in the decision making. Cited as reasons for their increased objectivity were the following: they were not emotionally tied to the situation, nor vying for a grade and were not trying to please the cooperating teacher. The program provided the post-interns an opportunity to reflect on the validity of suggestions given during their internship, compare their previous experience to this one and draw some conclusions.

Additionally, post-interns noted a growing awareness of the differences in styles and personalities of teachers and of teaching, and more importantly, these differences were viewed positively. A wide range of teacher personalities and teaching styles were seen as beneficial to both students and teachers. The experienced students also recognized teaching strategies which were effective across age levels and discipline areas. Developmental changes in children across age levels were noted. For some, the experience confirmed or changed their decisions about future teacher positions. One peer supporter felt the experience enabled her to affirm her decision to work with a particular age group. After observing the student intern working with very young children, the post-intern realized more strongly her preference for the middle school age group with whom she had had exerience. The opposite position was taken by another peer supporter. After working

with third graders as a student teacher, she grew to prefer the kindergarten age group she observed in ther peer-support role.

The opportunity to keep in touch with a classroom was valued by the peer supporters. Many were exposed to new ideas and curricular approaches which were different from their previous experience. One learned about a new reading program; another, about writing and publishing a newspaper with third grades and still another, learned how to organize a musical production. The post-interns noted techniques for their own future use.

Peer support people also realized that the problems they had encountered as student interns were often very similar to those being experienced by the present interns. The experienced students believed their skills as counselors were strengthed in talking with the less experienced students. They learned to criticize in helpful ways. They developed better listening skills and tried to avoid giving advice so that student interns could form their own opinions and decisions. They were able to note growth in the student interns and to talk with them about the changes observed. The peer supporters feel useful and needed and believed that their learning could be applied in new ways.

Conclusion

In the typical student teaching program, student teachers who interns successfully during the Fall Semester return to the university in Spring saddened. They talk of missing their classrooms, appear to be less involved in their university studies, and are anxious to obtain a position. The opportunity to be a peer support person seemed to minimize the com-

monly experienced separation pains, for as peer support people they were involved directly in classrooms and with students, simply in a different role. The realization that someone depended on them for assistance was a motivator and increased their confidence in their own skills.

Supported by someone in addition to the university supervisor and cooperating teacher encouraged those beginning student teaching to lose their inhibitions. More talk about teaching and students was the result. The fact that a "recent survivor", a person who had been in a similar position, was working with them was encouraging. Success in this internship experience might be within their reach as well.

For the university supervisors, the assets of the program were several. The supervisors were able to observe the ongoing development and stages of growth in teaching as students who had been novices became more mature through continuing classroom interaction. In addition, no longer feeling cut-off from the post-interns after they completed their student teaching, the supervisors developed closer professional relationships with them as peer supporters. A more harmonious relationship also seemed to develop with the student teachers, as they recognized that the supervisors were being supportive by providing a resource in another way. Discussion initiated during seminar sessions tended to continue during school visits, so a fuller picture of the individual's expereince was obtained. Cooperating teachers welcomed the peer supporters and viewed them as another resource. Hearing peer

supporters hash over problems, everyone involved faced the common concerns of initial teaching with renewed energy. As the three resources-university supervisor, cooperating teacher and peer support person worked together with the new student teachers, learning about teaching became a companionable activity where people shared perspectives on teaching and learning.

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